

The Relationship Between the State Enterprise for Postal, Telegraph and Telephone Services and the State in the Netherlands in Historical Perspective

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In recent years, in many countries numerous reforms have taken place with regard to the public sector. It is beyond doubt that the role of the private sector increased. This phenomenon occurred not only in the United States and the United Kingdom, but also in other European countries including the Netherlands.

The change in the relationship between public enterprise and the state is, however, not new. It has been a continuing process since the establishment of public enterprises. A historical analysis of this process is therefore important. This paper focuses on the Post, Telegraph and Telephone Company (PTT)². The goal of this paper is not only to shed light on the fascinating history of the State Enterprise for Postal, Telegraph and Telephone Services in the Netherlands and its changing relationship with the government, but also to explore the significance of the various motives and arguments which led to the establishment and to the recent denationalisation of the PTT.

In 1989 the Dutch PTT was denationalised and became the Royal PTT Netherlands NV (Koninklijke PTT Nederland, KPN), a private joint-stock company. All the shares were held by the state. The first instalment of shares was sold on the stock exchange in June 1994. The recent developments of the PTT will not be discussed here, but an analysis will be made of the past relationship between the PTT and the state. After a short introduction to the relevant aspects of Dutch public enterprises we concentrate foremost on the PTT. We begin by examining how different divisions of the PTT came to be government owned, and how the Post, Telegraph and Telephone became the PTT. Subsequently, the

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²The Post Office Savings Bank and Postal Cheque and Giro Service are not addressed in this study.

discussion on the relationship between the PTT and the government will be analysed and, finally, the factors which were important in the corporisation of the PTT will be addressed.

The Dutch Situation

Public enterprises have always been a relatively small sector within the Netherlands. Two categories of Dutch public enterprises can be distinguished, namely State Enterprises and 'state holdings in companies.' Sections of government departments can be legally defined as State Enterprises by the Company Act. Besides the PTT, other organisations such as the Royal Mint, the Government Printing and Publishing Office, the Fishing Port Authority, the Ordnance-workshop and the State Mines have been State Enterprises. Their historical roots date back to the turn of the century. In that same period, many municipal governments acquired the operations of the gas and electrical utilities. Between 1920 and 1940 the state purchased shares of certain privately owned companies making them NVs ('state holdings in companies').

In the Netherlands, a reduction in the number of government tasks has been under consideration since the early 1980s. Due to reduced growth rates, government cuts were necessary along with the curtailing of expansion activities in the public sector. In the United States and the United Kingdom, it was believed that the state should not carry out activities which could be competently handled by the private sector. The Netherlands was adopting a similar philosophy. The European Union, which attempted to strengthen its rules for competitiveness within branches of the public sector, was also important in helping the Dutch Government to decide the extent of its involvement in specific industries and activities.

During the 1980s, many public enterprises were privatised. In the Netherlands privatisation is not only defined as selling shares to the private sector and contracting work out, but also includes converting State Enterprises into joint-stock companies (NVs), where the state is the sole shareholder, also referred to as corporisation (*verzelfstanding*). Corporisation occurred in all former State Enterprises and was usually, as in the case of the PTT, the first step toward complete privatisation [2; 8; 17; 22; 23; 32].

The Post, Telegraphy and Telephony from Private to Public Hands

Until the beginning of the 18th century, postal service operations were leased to private firms by local governments. During this time, a few powerful individuals decided to take over the very lucrative postal service. In the middle of the 18th century, the postal service was transferred to the States of Holland and West Friesland and thus came in provincial hands [7, pp. 33-41; 16, pp. 17-24].

In 1799 the Dutch government declared that the decentralised postal service was nationalised, which was the first step towards a national postal service [7, p. 31]. The Dutch Post Act of 1807 implied the legal determination of the state monopoly. Under certain conditions, however, private services remained possible [5, pp. 99-100]. No actual postal monopoly was in place, since many concessions for the delivery of letters were issued to private

companies. The latter for instance being the case with mail delivery in the countryside, which was considered much too expensive [19, p. 54].

During the first half of the 19th century the government saw the postal service mainly as a source of income. The tariffs were very unfavourable which led to a frequent evasion of the state monopoly. A more careful inspection of and therefore a greater claim on the governmental postal services revealed the failure. Many complaints were raised and the question of state monopoly became a subject of frequent debate. [3, pp. 21-24]. This all led to the introduction of the First Post Act of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1850. This Act replaced all French laws and regulations which had applied for the Dutch Postal Service since the annexation by France (1811) [4, p. 349; 5, p. 100]. From then onwards, the postal service de jure and de facto had become a *state monopoly*. For the first time it should be possible to send and to receive mail in all places. Instead of a strong fiscal orientation, the obligation of the state to render services now became a prime motivation for exploitation [20, p. 2].

In the mid-1800s the telegraph service was introduced. The Dutch Iron Railway Company had constructed a telegraph line for its own use along the Amsterdam-The Hague railway [6, p. 15]. Requests to open telegraph lines for public exchange of messages initially were not agreed to by the government, mainly due to fear that such a decision would involve a loss of income from the postal services. The expansion of the telegraph service could not be stopped, however, and the government therefore decided to issue concessions to private companies [1, pp. 16-23].

In 1852 the State Telegraph Service was established. An important motivation for state exploitation was the refusal of Prussia to connect its network to that of the Netherlands, in case the latter would be privately owned. In addition, a fast connection between the major centres in the Netherlands was important for trade, government and defence. A more extensive telegraph network throughout the Netherlands was not considered to be feasible at short notice when left to various private companies. Moreover, it was feared that private companies would fail to construct non-profitable lines. Because of this, the state decided to construct the main connections. The construction and exploitation of the secondary lines was left to private companies [6, p. 244].

The construction and exploitation of the first telephone networks was carried out by private companies. For example the Dutch Bell Telephone company--established in 1880 by the International Bell Telephone Company, who had been granted a concession--completed the first net in 1881 in Amsterdam. In the early years, the telephone services were restricted to one city area. Soon it became possible to connect different local telephone networks. Because the state feared competition with the State Telegraph Service, exploitation by the state was considered. Finally a concession was granted to a private company, and in 1888 the first trunk lines came into being. The possibility of complete state exploitation in the future remained intact. Perhaps to facilitate this transformation, only the Bell Company was granted permission to connect the local networks. It was decided that a 'sensitive' drop in turnover of the State Telegraph Service had to be compensated in financial terms [19, p. 55]. In 1897 the central government took over all trunk networks.

Just before the turn of the century, private exploitation of the local telephone networks became a matter of discussion. The term for which the

concessions were issued came to an end. Since the private companies did not know whether their concessions would be extended they had made only small investments. Because of this, the waiting times for a new connection had increased considerably. In 1896, exploitation by the municipal government commenced in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Arnhem. Other local governments followed and after 1897 no *new* private telephone networks were established. The central government focused on the trunk telephony.

During the preparation and realisation of the Telegraph and Telephone Act of 1904 it was again debated whether the local telephony should become government controlled. Although this was not decided, this law did not exclude exploitation by the state. A stipulation in the Act was that all concessions had to be renewed. Because the revision of existing concessions proved to be problematic, the state gradually took over the exploitation by private companies and municipal governments. Not only was unity in the design and implementation of telephony and telegraphy as a whole--which was already controlled by the state--an important motivation for that decision, but the central government also considered telephone services as potentially profitable. In addition, in the past the financial valuation of the network had hampered the granting of new concessions. From 1927 onwards the entire public telephone network was controlled by the central government. Exceptions were the local government networks of Rotterdam, Amsterdam and The Hague until, during World War II, the PTT took them over.

The international telephone services were considered to be a government task from the very beginning. In 1895 a telephone connection with Belgium was realised and, one year later, with Germany. That this did not concern a fundamental choice is illustrated by the preference to attract the attention of private companies for the construction of a network to England. The state wanted to leave the risky and expensive construction of a long sea cable to a private company. England, however, was not interested in a project in private hands. In the 1920s a connection was eventually realised--under government control [11; 12; 14].

The Postal, Telegraph and Telephone Service Merged

Until now we have addressed the question how the various parts of the PTT in time have become government controlled. Later on, the postal service, telegraphy and telephony were merged into one company. What were the reasons behind this merger?

At first, the State Telegraph Service was not linked to the Postal Service. The Postal Service was placed under the responsibility of the Minister of Finance, whereas the Telegraph Service was under the Home Secretary. Not only was the Telegraph Service as such important for the central government but, in addition, permission to construct the network was required from the Home Secretary.

The option to put the State Telegraph Service under the control of the Postal Service was abandoned. Possible explanations for this decision may be the inferior services rendered by the Postal Service, the prospect of competition with the Post and the fact that the Telegraph was considered to be--at least to some extent--a service for the wealthy. Delay in the expansion of the telegraph

network and increasing losses shaped the background of the rapprochement of the Telegraph and the Postal Services. In the first instance, after the example of Prussia, the postal and telegraph offices were combined. To improve the co-operation the Telegraph Service was placed under the control of the Ministry of Finance. Only in 1886 a full merger of both Services was realised, which meanwhile had become under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Transport and Public Works [15].

The foundation for the organizational embedment of the management of Telephone Service within the PTT was laid at the introduction of the latter by considering it as a kind of telegraph and have it become subject to the Telegraph Act of 1852. Because the duty of a landowner to allow the construction of cables on his property had much further reaching consequences in the case of the telephone than for the telegraph, opponents urged the necessity of a separate Telephone Act. Nonetheless, after several unsuccessful attempts the Telephone and Telegraph Service were placed in one legal framework: the Telegraphs and Telephones Act of 1904 [13]. Only in 1928 was a place reserved for the Telephone Service in the name of the State Enterprise: the name was changed into 'the State Enterprise for Postal, Telegraph and Telephone Services.'

The Relationship Between the PTT and the State: an Eternal Debate

The budget of the PTT was commitment to the departmental budget. According to the members of parliament their insight into the financial position was insufficient. As a result, in 1904, 1906 and 1907 a commercial bookkeeping system was introduced at respectively the Telephone, Telegraph and Postal Services. Similarly, for other public services with a business orientation the wish existed to obtain a proper insight into their profitability. Under the Company Act of 1912 certain branches of the National Administration were assigned to function as a State Enterprise. For the PTT this change of status took effect on 1 January 1915. The conversion into a State Enterprise had few implications for management. An independent financial management failed to materialise, whereas the obligation of a commercial accounting bookkeeping system forced the enterprise to have a double accounting system. The possibility of parliamentary control had not diminished, therefore the management was not pleased with the new status of the company [10; 16, pp. 272-273; 20, pp. 2-14; 26; 27].

In the mid-1920s the call for a more independent status became louder. After World War I the management of the PTT was confronted with growing discontent among personnel, resulting in strikes. One of the reasons for this was the commitment to the newly introduced salary regulations for civil servants [28]. Due to the unfavourable economic tide in the early 1920s the government also economized on the PTT, which led to further tariff rises and dismissals of personnel. The reduction of postal, telegraph and telephone services resulted in dissatisfied clients. Moreover, continuous losses induced further personnel reductions, which again had implications for the services rendered. According to the management a more commercial policy would be necessary to face these difficulties. The constricting links with the state became evident. At that moment the business approach was limited to the internal procedures and manifested itself merely in a striving for greater efficiency [16, p. 279]. Not only on the part

of the company, but also trade and industrial circles urged for a more independent position of the PTT. Only then could the much desired improvement of the service be realised [9].

This debate did not finally result in more independence of the PTT. The Company Act of 1928 did, however, create the possibility to budget in a more business-like manner. Again, the aim was to improve the insight of the parliament into the business policy of the PTT [29]. The accumulation of reserves and contracting of loans, through which the PTT would be enabled to pursue a more independent financial policy, was rejected resolutely. It was feared that the PTT would be inclined to pursue a more independent company policy and would neglect the public interest.

It was decided to set up an advisory body, the Post Council. The Advisory Committee that was established in 1920 had been predominantly composed of civil servants, whereas the Post Council was no part of the PTT and consisted of representatives of various echelons.

In the early 1930s the government had to economize as a result of the depression. The PTT had to help reduce the budget deficit of the government. By reducing personnel expenses, the PTT was able to offer almost the same services. In the second half of the 1930s, the economy improved and the PTT's profits increased. During this time, the PTT wanted to create a general reserve fund. Although the Cabinet was not against this proposal, parliament feared it would lose effective control and did not want the PTT to become more independent than other State Enterprises and departments. Above all, the PTT's profits were urgently needed for other governmental activities.

During the occupation, the Germans permitted the PTT to become incorporated. The PTT therefore gained increased financial independence. The staff, however, remained civil servants. The Germans' objective was to strengthen their own power over the organisation, not to fulfil the long-felt desire of the PTT [16, p. 282; 20, pp. 42-58].

An attempt in 1947 to remain incorporated failed, and in 1954 the PTT regained its pre-war legal status as a State Enterprise. This was due to the fact that in fear of losing control over the PTT, the majority in parliament and also the Minister of Finance, rejected the PTT's status as an incorporated entity. However, the PTT did become more financially independent since it was allowed to form a general reserve fund. Their freedom was, however, limited; the Ministers of Finance and of Transport and Public Works, had to approve the investments [20, pp. 59-77; 25, p. 40]. The Post Council was replaced by the PTT Council, with regional divisions.

The government policy of retrenchment and consequent investment restrictions for the PTT, was the reason why the change of status was brought up again in the late 1950s. Attempts to obtain greater financial independence, by allowing the finance of the investments by profits and depreciation and the opportunity to borrow on the capital market, failed. The Minister of Finance had too many objections and hesitated for too long. With the premature departure of the Cabinet the plans were shelved.

The PTT still wished greater independence. Since the boom of 1959 it became almost impossible to recruit good qualified personnel, because of the limitations of the civil servant regulations. The members of parliament also became increasingly aware of the restrictions for the PTT, not only in financial

terms but also in terms of personnel policy. Besides the limited possibilities to invest, the commitment to the annual national budget hindered a long-term policy. Therefore, the members of parliament pressed for a corporate body for the PTT. More financial freedom by means of borrowing on the capital market required a change in the status as a corporate body. However, no decision was taken. To overcome this deadlock a Government Commission was set up in August 1962 [20, pp. 83-104; 21].

The Goedhart Commission drew the conclusion that the status of the PTT at that time indeed hindered a more alert company policy. The PTT should get a special status as a *sui generis status*, a legal entity in the public sector. Moreover, it was proposed that for special or large projects the company should be able to contract loans on the capital market. If necessary, the PTT would be allowed to deviate from the law with regard to its personnel policy. The representative of the Home Office nevertheless expressed his discontent. The PTT, at that moment the biggest employer in the Netherlands with almost 60,000 employees, should not have its own personnel statute [21]. It turned out that it was no longer possible to reach a settlement which was acceptable for all parties involved. The resignation of the Marijnen Cabinet in February 1965 meant the end of giving concrete form to the proposals of the Goedhart Commission.

Due to inflation and the resulting increase in wage levels in the early 1970s, the financial position of the PTT deteriorated considerably. The Ministry of Finance made less funds available for new investments. Complete internal funding of investments was requested and the contribution to the Treasury increased. This led to frequent protests from the PTT and the public, who were confronted with increasing tariffs. Again, the status was debated in parliament, again without success. A private member's bill which would enable the PTT to borrow on the capital market in order to satisfy the great demand for telephone connections, did not get a majority.

In the course of the 1970s the wish of the PTT for a more independent price and investment policy was realised by internal finance, made possible by the favourable company results realised.

Advances in technology led to many new developments in the field of telecommunication and information at the end of the 1970s and the following decade. Because of these external developments the PTT shifted towards a more commercial and market-oriented approach. The company increasingly focused on the professional market. In view of the expected growing investment needs in the telecommunication market which was becoming increasingly international, more autonomy would be needed--especially with regard to the company's financial policy. In addition, employing well-educated personnel would become even more important. The commitment to the conditions of employment of the state, which lagged behind those of the private sector, would be a major hurdle. At that time, the Dutch government became increasingly aware that a high quality telecommunication sector was of great importance to the economic growth of the nation. The Swarttouw Commission, set up in 1981, recommended to let the PTT function more independently and at a greater distance from the state. Based on the report of the Steenbergen Commission, set up in 1984 to advise on the new status and structure of the PTT, the government came to a standpoint. This concerned, among others, the corporisation of the PTT and the granting of an exclusive concession to the PTT regarding public utilities in the

fields of telecommunication and postal services. The concession concerned the construction, exploitation and maintenance of a telecommunication infrastructure and the connection with foreign telecommunication infrastructures. Postal services were also covered by the concession. The monopoly on peripheral equipment (e.g. telephone sets, car telephones, teleprinters) was abolished [24; 30; 31].

On 1 January 1989 the State Enterprise PTT was converted into a joint-stock company. The Royal PTT Netherlands NV is the holding company of two subsidiaries: the PTT Post BV and PTT Telecom BV. Both BVs hold exclusive concessions in certain fields. This has increased the distance from the state. Being an NV enabled the PTT to borrow on the capital market. In addition, the PTT was finally separated from the national budget.

Summing Up

In the foregoing, it becomes clear that changes of government have slowed down the possible change of status of the PTT. Nevertheless, the issue frequently re-appeared on the political agenda. In the following, the constant factors in the discussion are examined.

From being a governmental department the PTT increasingly developed into a 'real' company. In the course of time both the government and parliament began to accept the significance of a more business-oriented approach of the PTT. The growing importance given to the role of the clients is, among others, illustrated by the composition of the consecutive advisory committees of the PTT. Whereas most members of the original Advisory Committee were still civil servants, in the later Post Council various interest groups were represented. The PTT Council, which replaced the Post Council in 1954, was expanded with regional advisory boards to facilitate contact with clients.

In becoming more business-oriented, the PTT was increasingly faced with the restrictions resulting from its financial dependency on public funding. Frequently, the PTT was used by the state as an instrument of economic policy. In the early 1920s the budget of the State Enterprise was reduced, and during the recession of the 1930s company profits had to compensate for the deficit of the government budget. At the end of the 1950s and in the early 1970s the budget was again reduced. Especially in the case of major investment needs, the restrictive financial government policy was seriously felt. More financial elbowroom could have been realised by building up reserves and by borrowing on the capital market. More than once the PTT pursued this point. Fear that more financial freedom may lead to a company policy that would be considered too independent, was the main reason why only in 1954 parliament allowed the PTT to build up its own general reserves. Even then, the company was not completely free in the allocation of these reserves. Permission of the ministers of Transport and Public Works and Finance was still required. Permission to borrow on the capital market was not granted that soon. A major hindrance was the required corporate body. In the early 1960s more support was received to allow external loans. This, among others, followed from the proposal of the Goedhart Commission. We observe, however, that this proposal merely concerned special projects. Being an NV, at present the PTT can borrow on the capital market without any problems.

Especially since the end of the 1950s, the commitment to personnel regulations of the state became a major hurdle for the PTT in its attempts to have an independent personnel policy. More flexible conditions of employment were considered a necessity in a period of labour scarcity. Later on, continuous technological developments and the choice for a more commercial and market-oriented policy brought along problems in selecting and keeping sufficiently qualified personnel under civil service conditions. In the discussion on the new PTT status the government for a long time required the retention of the civil servant status. For that reason, in the 1960s and 1970s an NV was not a feasible option.

An important, constant factor in the debate on the PTT concerns the tasks of the enterprise and its monopoly position. Interesting in this context is a comparison with the debates which took place on the state mines. The task and position of the PTT had always been considered fundamentally different from that of the state mines. The state mines were considered a profit-oriented company that was exploited by the state but had to compete with private companies [18, p. 99; 20, pp. 8-9, 66]. The PTT, on the other hand, was a monopolistic company. From the political viewpoint, the belief was long held that in order to have properly functioning postal, telegraph and telephone services--which was considered to be of great importance to society--a monopoly was needed. When competition started to emerge in the 1980s, especially in the field of telecommunication, the circumstances under which the PTT had to operate increasingly began to resemble that of the state mines. In that period, the monopoly position of the PTT was brought up for discussion. This trend was also observed abroad. More importance was attached to the benefits of the market. In debating the monopoly position a new dimension was added to the discussion on the status of the PTT. The company opposed the disadvantages of its position as a State Enterprise, but--in the nature of things--had less problems with the positive effects resulting from the legal monopoly position.

The example of developments elsewhere no doubt had a significant effect on the decision making process regarding the position of the PTT in the Netherlands. In the early 1960s it is still indicated by the Goedhart Commission that also in neighbouring countries a *sui generis* construction is not uncommon. At that time, foreign examples of NV constructions were not yet known. After the conversion in 1966 of the state mines into an NV (the public company was called DSM, Dutch State Mines), the question frequently rose as to whether such a solution would also be feasible for the PTT [20, p. 128].

The deregulations in the United States and the privatisation in the United Kingdom were also important in this respect. Similarly, we should not forget that as a result of the legislation of the European Union a more competitive post and telecommunication sector has emerged in many countries.

We also observe that in the course of time the PTT increasingly tried to influence public opinion. In the beginning, the company particularly attempted to convince members of parliament that the status and especially the financial dependency on the state were a major restriction to conducting its business properly.

When a decline in services rendered coincides with an increase in tariffs, the status debate re-appears on the political agenda, usually after protests from society, as they occurred for instance in the 1920s. In some cases, the PTT

cleverly made use of the discontent of the public. In his New Year message of 1973 director general Leenman, for instance, emphasised that under the financial hold of the government, a further worsening of the services rendered by the PTT was unavoidable. This message increased the fear of the consumers that, indeed, the services would worsen. The many press reports that followed contributed to the debate on the status of the PTT in parliament.

Technological developments from the 1970s onwards brought new possibilities in the field of tele-information services. In case the PTT would not keep up with these new developments, this could imply a loss of income in the existing information services. A similar fear of competition from the modern, fast exchange of messages was observed with the emergence of telegraphy and telephony in the 19th century. At that time, telegraphy was feared to lead to a loss of income from the postal services and trunk telephony was feared for a loss of income from the telegraphy.

In conclusion, we would like to address the division of the postal services and telecommunication into two separate BVs which took place with the privatisation of the PTT. It should be noted in this respect, that in the Netherlands both telecommunication and postal services have been privatised. The division of both services did not come as a surprise. Telecommunication increasingly became technical in nature whereas the postal services remained labour intensive. In addition, especially after World War II, the profits of telecommunication frequently had compensated for the losses of the postal services [16, p. 299]. Such cross subsidisation would no longer be tolerable in the newly privatised, commercial PTT.

Some Last Remarks

In its struggle to loosen the ties with the state the PTT continually argued that being a State Enterprise hindered its development towards an alert business policy. An important obstacle to the change of status was the desire for government control of the PTT. Also in this case, the preference of the government to withdraw from economic life in this period has made this change possible.

Furthermore, the change of status of the PTT in the 1980s was determined by technological developments and by internationalisation of the telecommunication market. Because of this, the arguments mentioned earlier were put in a different light. Because of the growing importance of the telecommunication sector for the economic development in general, an effective and efficient PTT company policy is, nowadays, considered to be of prime importance for the nation as a whole.

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